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AUTHOR Sumsion, Jennifer
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ABSTRACT

This case study used in-depth conversational interviews and careful reading of a professional portfolio to explore the basis of one early childhood educator's resilience. The study uncovered influences contributing to her resilience and enabling her to thrive professionally despite difficult circumstances. These influences are: (1) personal qualities (self insight, leadership skills, risk taking and perseverance, macro perspective, self preservation); (2) contextual features (support network, having a mentor, ongoing professional development opportunities; and (3) interplay between personal qualities and contextual features (teaching as inquiry, teaching as connectedness, appreciation of the "bigger picture"). The findings were consistent with conceptualizations of resilience as a complex and multidimensional phenomena. (Contains 29 references.) (EV)

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"Bad days don't kill you; they just make you stronger": A case study of an early childhood educator's resilience

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Jennifer Sumsion
Institute of Early Childhood
Macquarie University
NSW 2109
Australia

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Introduction

Children's services in Australia, as in many international contexts, are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain staff (Commonwealth Services and Health Industry Training Board, 1996; Goelman & Guo, 1998). The consequent staffing shortages are of grave concern as the quality of children's services is largely dependent on a committed, well-qualified and stable workforce (Manlove, 1994; Manlove & Guzell, 1997; Wangmann, 1995). To date, efforts to address staff shortages have focussed mainly on stemming attrition from the field.

Factors contributing to the high rates of attrition have been well documented. They include relatively poor remuneration and working conditions; low professional status within the broader community; and the highly demanding, sometimes conflicting roles and responsibilities of early childhood educators and the physical and emotional exhaustion that these can engender (Boyd & Schneider, 1997; Goelman & Guo, 1998; Manlove, 1993; Stremmel, 1991; Stremmel, Benson & Powell, 1993). Few studies, in contrast, appear to have investigated what enables some early childhood educators to withstand the impact of these factors.

The literature about teacher stress (for overviews see Kyriacou, 2001;Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999) suggests how teachers might be assisted to manage stress and

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avoid burn out, and identifies environmental characteristics that can help to reduce or circumvent stress. While focussing mainly on school contexts, many of the issues raised could also be relevant to early childhood contexts. Effective stress management skills and the good fortune to work in an environment in which potential stress factors are addressed, however, may account only partially for resilience.

Taking a broader view, I argue that we need to ask, "What makes it possible for some people to resist or resolve those detrimental influences" (Glantz & Johnson, 1999, p. ix) that can so often contribute to attrition. In other words, what enables some early childhood educators to thrive, even though they, too, may experience the same stress factors or disincentives that lead many others to leave the field? What accounts for their resilience? And what can we learn from their stories that might help us to address the staffing shortage in children's services?

My premise is that a greater understanding of resilience and how we might foster it "offers the possibility of more effective interventions" (Glantz & Johnson, 1999, p. ix) than a focus on attrition alone. It is vital that we continue to address structural factors such as poor renumeration and working conditions that contribute to attrition. If we are to address the current staffing crisis in children's services, however, we also need to understand the protective influences that contribute to the development of "the strengths and resources to resist and overcome" (Leshner, 1999, p.3) these adverse structural factors.

Theoretical and methodological perspectives

Resilience is an "illusive construct" (Kumpfer, 1999, p. 180) that has been variously

defined as a quality, a process, and an outcome (Kaplan, 1999). Here, I adopt a deliberately broad and inclusive conceptualisation of resilience as the demonstrated ability to thrive in the face of adverse, challenging or threatening circumstances (Kaplan, 1999; Rolf, 1999). In a children's service context, I use resilience to mean the ability to continue to find deep and sustaining personal and professional satisfaction in one's work as an early childhood educator despite the presence of multiple adverse factors and circumstances that have led many to leave the field. To borrow from Rolf (1999), resilience is what you are referring to "when you say, 'well how can that be?. … that … [early childhood educator] should have gone under a long time ago, but he or she hasn't" (Rolf, 1999, p.11).

Like Johnson (1999), I see resilience as fluid, not fixed, and involving on-going "negotiation through life" (p. 226). In this article, I describe a single case study that sought to illuminate how a young early childhood educator negotiated the difficulties that have led so many other early childhood educators to leave the field. Single case studies are not generalisable to other early childhood educators or contexts. Nevertheless, along with Coffey and Delamont (2000), I believe that "individual biographies and personal trajectories are key to the collective biography of any occupation or profession" (p.60).

Previous studies of resilience have been undertaken mostly with children and adolescents considered "at risk" because of their social, cultural or economic circumstances (Werner & Johnson, 1999). These studies have identified a diverse range of factors potentially associated with resilience. [For comprehensive overviews see Kaplan, 1999; Kumpfer, 1999]. In broad terms, these factors can be clustered into

three groups: personal qualities and characteristics (e.g., motivation, internal locus of control, determination, interpersonal awareness, self-esteem, problem solving skills); environmental factors (e.g., caring others, effective support systems) and person-environment interactional processes (e.g., the contribution by individuals to the creation of supportive communities that in turn sustain them). Whether these factors are relevant across different age groups, cultures and contexts is yet to be determined (Kumpfer, 1999).

Personal perspectives

My interest in resilience stems from my earlier attempts to understand why Sarah*, a highly regarded and seemingly committed early childhood educator, left the field after teaching for only five years (Author, 2001;Author, in press). Serendipitously, as I was trying to make sense of Sarah's decision, I was introduced to Natalie who had graduated — from a different university — at the same time as Sarah. Like Sarah, Natalie had encountered some particularly difficult and challenging situations in her five years in the field. Yet Natalie, unlike Sarah, was thriving personally and professionally. Moreover, she anticipated a long term, rewarding career in children's services. I was intrigued by the differences in their accounts and perspectives. What accounted for Natalie's resilience, I wondered, and what might we learn from it that might help to stem the loss of teachers like Sarah from the field?

Generating and interpreting the data

My understanding of Natalie's resilience is based on two in-depth conversational interviews with Natalie and a careful reading of her 150 page professional portfolio, developed as part of her university study to upgrade her three-year Bachelor of

Teaching (early childhood) to a four-year Bachelor of Education (early childhood) degree. Natalie and I met in my office (in a different university from where Natalie was studying). We scheduled our meetings to coincide with her visits to the campus to attend a monthly discussion group of people interested in exploring ideas associated with the early childhood centres of Reggio Emilia.

Each interview was approximately 90 minutes in duration. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, and transcripts were returned to Natalie for verification and comment. The first interview focused on Natalie's motivations for becoming an early childhood teacher, her career history, and the incidents and influences she saw as most significant in her career to date. Natalie left with me her professional portfolio to read prior to our second interview. Likewise, she agreed to read an account of Sarah's career experiences and her decision to leave the field (Author, 2001) before we next met. In the second interview, Natalie identified similarities and differences she saw between her career experiences and Sarah's, and their respective response to these experiences. I then invited to Natalie to speculate about the "protective factors" that had contributed to her career satisfaction and her decision to stay in the field, despite the difficult circumstances that she, like Sarah, had encountered.

Guided by the protective factors identified by Natalie, and informed by my reading about resilience, I then reread the interview transcripts and Natalie's portfolio. I looked for influences that may have been overlooked by Natalie, as well as interconnections and themes in the data. I shared with Natalie my preliminary mapping of the influences that seemed to contribute to her resilience. She confirmed and extended my initial mapping, and responded to a draft of this article. As such, the

influences outlined in this article represent our co-constructed understandings of her resilience. Before outlining these influences, I briefly profile Natalie and her career history.

Natalie: A brief profile and career history

Twenty-five year old Natalie was from an middle socio-economic, Anglo-Australian background. She explained that she had "grown up with children around", and had wanted to teach since she was "10 or 12 years old". She had entered her preservice program as a school leaver and, in her view, there had been little to distinguish her from her peers in the program.

Shortly after graduation, Natalie accepted a position as a teacher of three to five-year-old children in a 40-place child care centre in a tranquil, semi-rural town on the outskirts of Sydney. She described the centre as "very Anglo-Saxon, very traditional, very stable and settled". Natalie's first year of teaching was enjoyable, but not "particularly exciting or challenging". Consequently, she welcomed an invitation, the following year, to job-share the director's position for she knew that role would bring new challenges, responsibilities and opportunities. Twelve months later, because of her impending marriage and her relocation to another area of Sydney, she left the preschool to seek a full-time director's position elsewhere.

After applying unsuccessfully for two directorships, and rejecting the offer of a third, Natalie eventually accepted a teacher's position in a community-based child care centre. She soon regretted her decision because of what she saw as the staff's unprofessional practices. She explained:

> Staff would go to lunch for an hour, and I'd have the children by myself. Then all the staff would go for afternoon tea and I'd be left outside with babies all by myself. It went against what I believed in ethically. ...I brought it up with the director quite a few times, with no response. I was planning my wedding at that stage, and I just didn't feel strong enough to fight it all. … I couldn't see that it was going to get any better and thought, "It's just not going to be worth it".

Two months later Natalie resigned, more determined than ever to find a director's position. She wanted to be "in the driving seat and to have some control over the situation", she explained. When offered the directorship of 40-place child care centre catering for children from birth to five years — one of four operated by an organisation in a low socio-economic, culturally diverse and densely populated area of Sydney — she eagerly accepted.

The context was very different from the comfortable semi-rural setting in which Natalie had gained her previous limited experience as director. As she described in her portfolio, "The families are from very diverse cultural backgrounds … and many are from very low socio-economic backgrounds. The majority of staff (eight primary carers and two ancillary staff) are bilingual". Unlike the centre in which she had shared the director's role, staff morale was low. "The team was dysfunctional", Natalie recorded in her portfolio. She was concerned by the "poor communication, lack of teamwork skills, and lack of empathy [for] or interest in one another", and sensed that staff felt "unsupported and unheard and undervalued" with "no control over what was happening", making the situtation "even more explosive". Absenteeism and staff turnover were high, and it seemed to Natalie that staff lacked

commitment "to their jobs and to the children".

According to Natalie, the previous director had long since "given up" and the centre was in disarray. An added pressure, Natalie explained, was that "the centre was due for Accreditation review and re-licensing all within the first 10 months" of her appointment. Initially, neither the staff nor the families had much confidence in Natalie. "They thought I was very young and setting myself up for failure", she said. Natalie, herself, had many "doubts and fears".

Three months after her appointment, she returned from sick leave to find that the organisation's children's services manager "had been called in to the centre because two of the staff were having a screaming match". Soon after one staff member "had a nervous breakdown at the centre". Feeling "emotionally drained" and "quite exhausted", Natalie began to rethink her choice of career. "I don't know that I want to do this any more", she told her fiancée.

In many respects, therefore, Natalie's first three years in the field did not appear to augur well for a long term commitment to a career in children's services. She had felt bored as a teacher; she had left a position after only two months because of her concerns about the quality of the service; and, as director, she had taken on what appeared to be an overwhelmingly difficult and stressful challenge, particularly in light of her limited experience in a director's role. Her brief career history to this point reflected many of the well-documented issues contributing to difficulties in attracting and retaining staff in children's services. And yet, almost three years after taking on the directorship and now in her seventh year in the field, Natalie is now "really

passionate, really excited" about her work as an early childhood educator. I now outline some of the influences that contributed to her resilience and enabled her to thrive professionally despite these difficult circumstances.

Personal qualities

Several personal qualities that emerged from the data seemed instrumental to Natalie's resilience. These included: self insight; leadership skills; a willingness to take risks and perseverance; a macro perspective; and a strong sense of self-preservation. Their impact is described briefly below.

Self insight

Natalie had considerable insight into what sustained her as an early childhood educator. She was equally aware of what she found enervating about her role and consciously pursued a career path congruent with her insights. For example, she knew that she "didn't want to be with the children all day", for she had resented feeling confined to "your own little world [of the classroom and] of your relationships with the children". Essentially, she found the role of teacher limiting. In her words, "It didn't feel like enough. I was looking for more challenges". In contrast, she thrived on the multiplicity of responsibilities, uncertainties, and challenges that she associated with being a director. "You are always wearing different hats and roles, and running a million miles an hour", she noted. Even more importantly for Natalie, being a director required her to establish connections beyond the centre, thus enabling her to feel part of a larger professional landscape.

Natalie was acutely aware that ongoing opportunities for career progression would be

important in sustaining her commitment to a career in children's services. "I find that in any job I've ever had I'll always be looking around for the next step. I'm not particularly happy just staying where I am", she commented. "The future, that bigger picture of where am I going to be, or how is this going to get me somewhere, that ambition, I guess, is important to me". She valued the challenges she encountered as a director, for she saw them as "stepping stones to maybe get somewhere else" and a way of "building a wealth of experience to maybe use a bit later on". Her orientation to future rewards, rather than to immediate career satisfaction was key to understanding her resilience.

Although Natalie welcomed challenges, she only accepted those that enabled her some "control" over decision-making, and directions to be pursued. Obtaining a directorship, therefore, was pivotal to her decision to continue in children's services. As she put it, "Control and decision making … [are] important in keeping levels of satisfaction and contentment in your work. And I think that was probably my turn around: getting a Director's position. I felt that I was in control". She realised, however, that her need for control could not be at the expense of staff feeling excluded from decision-making processes.

Leadership skills

Natalie's leadership skills enabled her to satisfy her need for control without alienating her staff. She went to considerable lengths, for example, to encourage collaborative decision-making. As she explained:

> I didn't want to come in as a person that was really going to come over the top. I wanted the staff to really own this process of improvement. Because

if that didn't happen, it would have never changed ..."

Encouraging staff to set goals assisted in building a more positive climate, she noted:

> I like the idea of having something that we are working towards because I find that starts to get people excited. Once we see that working well, we move the goal posts and we start working on something else. It keeps everyone really fresh.

As the climate in the centre gradually became more collegial, Natalie gained considerable vicarious satisfaction from the achievements of her staff, and in her contributions to their achievements. She commented:

> To say that I'm proud might sound a little condescending; but when the staff are working professionally, I feel their breakthroughs as well. … I feel a sense of pride that they have developed and grown so much. I sort of feel that I have made the right pushes at the right times.

Indeed, Natalie's success in team building was striking, an achievement she attributed in large part to her commitment to open communication, flexibility and patience. And, as she put it:

> We've had to be quite up front about any problems that are bothering us … and I've had to have been very flexible and quite patient, because, as I said, it's not been easy. But I think it is all part of it. You have to have those qualities, if you're going to succeed.

These excerpts indicate that Natalie's leadership skills contributed in at least two respects to her resilience. They vested in her the authority to take, in a manner acceptable to her staff, the control that she considered so necessary to her job satisfaction. They also assisted her to overcome the daunting challenges she had encountered when she first took the director's position. Her achievements as

director brought intrinsic rewards, but as Natalie was aware, they also had the potential to advance her career.

Risk-taking and perseverance

Although Natalie took pride in her successes, she identified her willingness to "be a risk-taker" as equally important in understanding her resilience. In her words, "If you've got the confidence and ability to take risks; if you're willing to take a chance with different perspectives from how you've traditionally looked at it, then it [working in children's services] can be new and exciting all the time". Implicit in being a risk taker, however, was the ability to accept failure because, as Natalie pointed out, "Sometimes you do fail". Perseverance, therefore, was essential.

To Natalie, perseverance entailed seeing through a project to completion. She recounted how, during the difficult first months as director, she found herself thinking, "I'll get myself out of here quickly if another position opens up". Yet when an opportunity arose for her to leave the centre, she turned it down. "I knew that I wasn't finished there", she explained. "It wasn't what I had set out to achieve. It wasn't complete. I just felt that there wasn't a sense of closure and that I wouldn't have been happy to move on". Again, her future orientation was evident. As she explained, "I might not always see the full rewards now, but maybe later down the track I might see the benefits of some hard work and sticking at it". Her future orientation, in a sense, reflected the macro perspective she brought to her work as an early childhood educator.

Macro perspective

By macro perspective, I mean Natalie's ability to take a broad view of working in children's services, and of workplace conditions in general. Her macro perspective seemed to contribute to her resilience in several ways. First, it enabled her to read the rhythms in her workplace. She referred, for example, to the cyclical nature of "budget cuts, nearly on cue every couple of years". Reading the rhythms helped her to anticipate, and to learn to manage, recurrent sources of stress. Second, Natalie's macro perspective enabled her to compare conditions across a range of occupations. As she pointed out, children's services is not the only field where "you have to look at budgets and work out figures, and provide statistics and lobby". Third, her macro perspective helped maintain a sense of balance. She commented, "You can't fool yourself that you won't have bad days. That happens in any job, in any life. You have those bad days. You learn to deal with them by trying to see the good things that happen". Together, these capacities translated to a certain pragmatism. "Bad days don't kill you; They just make you stronger", she noted. "Every time I have a bad day, I think of that", she added.

Self preservation

Natalie's strong sense of self-preservation was similarly instrumental to her resilience. Referring again to the importance of balance, she noted:

> Work doesn't rule my life. Work is very important … but at the end of the day I can go home and have a real interest in other things. And I will always make time for those things, and for family. I think it's important to have other interests and other balances in your life.

Likewise, Natalie took an active responsibility for her well-being. "You've got to look after yourself", she emphasised. She tried, for example, to monitor or stay "in tune" with her stress levels. "I know when I am finding things stressful or difficult", she explained. "At those times I don't take work home. I don't stay late. If I want to go home and do the gardening, then I do". Learning to say "no" and to communicate her concerns were also essential, she commented.

The interplay between her personal qualities outlined here, rather than simply her ability to manage stress effectively, seemed crucial in understanding her resilience. As the following section illustrates, contextual features of her work environment were also important in understanding her resilience.

Contextual features

Contextual features of Natalie's workplace environment that contributed to her resilience included her access to a support network and to a mentor, as well as her exposure to new perspectives through ongoing professional development opportunities arising from her return to study and her involvement in the Reggio Emilia discussion group. The impact of these features is explained briefly below.

Support network

Natalie spoke highly of the informal support systems available to her through the cluster of four centres operated by her employers. "I've got a network that I can depend on", she commented, and that "has definitely been a big help to me". The proximity of other directors helped to circumvent feelings of professional isolation. As Natalie pointed out, "I see the other directors at least once a week. Not necessarily for a director's meeting but it might be an inservice, or a budget meeting or dropping

over to pick up equipment". The network provided emotional support — "If I need to, I can always pick up the phone, and there is someone there" — and the sharing of practical strategies, as Natalie explained:

> They have similar problems, and you draw on strategies that others use. That means that you go back in a proactive fashion. And that's about taking control. That is a very important feeling; that sense of "I can do something about it".

The directors, in turn, were supported by a children's services manager. Aware of Natalie's ambition and of the challenges she was facing, the children's services manager took on the role of mentor to Natalie.

Having a Mentor

Natalie held her mentor in high regard, personally and professionally. "She's one of those really nice people", Natalie explained. "She inspires me and shares my enthusiasm, and she encourages me to explore ideas and take certain risks". Natalie valued the opportunity to learn from her mentor's wealth of experience and wisdom. "She's had a lot of experience, so her advice has been really important", she commented. Even more important was her mentor's active fostering of Natalie's professional growth. As Natalie put it:

> She gives me some good contacts and some guidance about where to go, and what to explore. She sees a bigger picture than I do. She subscribes to a lot of journals so things that she finds that are quite interesting or relevant, she sends to me. And she knows the grants that are coming up to apply for, and things like that. I doubt that I would have had the opportunities that I've had without her.

As well as helping Natalie keep in touch with developments in the field, her mentor encouraged Natalie to reflect on her career goals and to develop a career plan. "She's always talking about things like, 'Where do you see yourself in 5 years time?' " Natalie noted. At her mentor's urging, Natalie decided to return to university to upgrade her degree to enhance her career prospects. She also acted on her mentor's recommendation that she join the Reggio Emilia discussion group. Both undertakings provided Natalie with opportunities for ongoing professional development that seemed central to her resilience.

Ongoing professional development opportunities

Natalie's university studies introduced her to new ways of conceptualising her role as an early childhood educator. She was encouraged "to think outside the 'what is' to the 'what might be' ". Developing her portfolio was a pivotal aspect of her studies. It reaffirmed and celebrated her achievements and highlighted the importance of reflecting critically on her decisions and directions. Similarly, her involvement in the Reggio Emilia discussion group introduced her to further new perspectives and possibilities, as the following section explains.

Interplay between personal qualities and contextual features

In many respects, Natalie's exposure to these new perspectives and possibilities, and her response to them, reflects the interplay between her personal qualities and the contextual features of her work environment. Here, I try to illuminate this interplay by focusing on how Natalie began to reconceptualise her work as an early childhood educator in terms of inquiry, connectedness, and contribution to social capital.

Teaching as inquiry

For Natalie, becoming a director had been a way avoiding what she saw as the monotony of spending her entire day with young children. Her involvement in the Reggio Emilia discussion group, at the urging of her mentor, challenged her perception of teachers trapped "in the day-to-day drudge of routine". In coming "to see children's learning in a different light", Natalie also began to "see teaching in a different light". The idea of "teachers as researchers" was especially enticing. As a researcher, she pointed out, "You can ask so many questions, even though you don't necessarily know the answers". For Natalie, the uncertainty of unanswered questions opened up previously unimagined possibilities. Exploring these new possibilities enabled Natalie to engage in the risk-taking that she associated with professional growth. Knowing that she was continuing to develop professionally reassured her that she was moving forward in her career. As she had emphasised previously, the possibility of career progression was crucial to her maintaining her commitment to early childhood education.

By drawing deeply on her leadership skills, Natalie was able to motivate her staff to

join her in exploring the possibilities raised by the Reggio Emilia discussion group. The fundamental changes that she and her staff gradually managed to bring about in the centre were tangible evidence of her achievements as director. Natalie described how:

> Now, we're are all really passionate and excited about what we do and about what the children are doing. I attribute a lot of this to thinking about innovative practices. It's got their [the staff's] focus off the mundane into something exciting, and that's changed their attitudes.

Her success reaffirmed to her the importance she attached to professional agency — of "being in the driving seat", as she put it — if she were to continue to find her career satisfying.

Underpinning the successful changes, in Natalie's view, was the commitment she and her staff had made to engaging in reflective practices. "Everything we have achieved at the centre has all come through being able to sit down and reflect upon it, and then change it", she reported. Her return to university study had been instrumental in alerting her to the value of reflective practices. She saw these as practical tools. "If you're having difficulties, hopefully, you can reflect yourself out of it. You think about it and wonder why, and ask the necessary questions and then go and do something about it", she said. Natalie's sense of agency (that is, her confidence in her capacity to achieve what she wanted to achieve) was fostered in part through her involvement in reflective inquiry, and further contributed to her resilience.

Teaching as connectedness

Reconceptualising teaching as reflective inquiry freed Natalie from her earlier

constructions of teaching as routine adherence to traditions and orthdoxies. Together with her staff, she spoke regularly at parent evenings, liaison meetings with local schools, community functions, conferences and professional development sessions about the innovations in their centre that had arisen from their exploration of new possibilities. Her growing sense of connectedness with parents, the local community, and the wider early childhood field helped to exorcise her earlier fear of being trapped within "the four walls and the gates of your own little centre". Her involvement in these activities beyond the centre gave Natalie the "sense of moving forward" professionally that was essential to her maintaining her commitment to her career.

Appreciating the "bigger picture"

Natalie's growing sense of connectedness to the wider community made her increasingly aware of the socio-political context of teachers' work — "seeing yourself as part of a bigger picture", as she put it. "Looking at that big picture has made a difference to me in the way that I view teaching, and myself", Natalie noted. Her university studies provided her with a theoretical underpinning to her emerging conception of teacher as a community and political activist. She spoke increasingly of her work as building social capital, or "building links with the community and other professionals, in an effort to make changes in society". "If you're going to make a mark", she continued, "you're going to have to network with the community, and to work together to build a community ideal". It seemed clear that Natalie's personal qualities and the characteristics of the context in which she was working, combined to engender a sense of personal and professional agency that is fundamental to understanding her resilience.

DISCUSSION

This case study of Natalie's resilience as an early childhood educator is consistent with conceptualisations of resilience as a complex and multidimensional phenomena. It highlights, too, the role of personal qualities, and contextual features, and the interplay between them described in much of the literature. To my mind, it suggests that further investigations of resilience could usefully inform efforts to address the staffing crisis.

A focus on resilience would provide a counter-foil to the current emphasis on teacher stress, burnout, and attrition. As such, it might contribute new perspectives, and thus new insights. In most explanations of attrition, for example, stress is conceptualised as a negative aspect of teachers' work (Smylie, 1999). In contrast, accounts of resilience suggest that stress can be positive. In Natalie's case, stress led to her taking an active role in reshaping her workplace environment so that it ultimately became more sustaining.

Natalie's sense of agency seemed instrumental in this reshaping. This case study suggests that her self-efficacy was an outcome of interactions between her personal qualities (e.g., her commitment to continuing to develop professionally) and contextual features (e.g., her access to a mentor who suggested further study, and involvement in the Reggio Emilia discussion group). As Glantz and Sloboda (1999) argue, we need to investigate further the mechanisms and processes of interactions between the personal and the contextual, and how these might give rise to protective influences that contribute to resilience. It would be useful, for example, to understand more about how early childhood educators' constructions of their various professional

identities reflect, shape, or otherwise inform their responses to the various discourses they encounter about working with young children. It is interesting to speculate about whether Natalie might responded differently had her university study emphasised the more traditional discourses of early childhood teacher as carer, rather than contributor to social capital. Put differently, we need to know more about identity and discourse and how together they might foster, or hinder, resilience.

If we are to identify patterns in influences contributing to or hindering early childhood educators' resilience we to move beyond single case studies to much larger investigations. As well as focusing on personal qualities, we need to know more about the contextual features that might foster protective influences that in turn contribute to resilience. For Natalie, access to a support network, a mentor, and opportunities for professional development seemed instrumental.

We know little, however, about the aspects and characteristics of support networks and mentor relationships most likely to promote resilience. Should they primarily aim to be "supportive" in the traditional, liberal humanitarian sense advocated in much of the literature about leadership in early childhood education? Or, as others advise, should they aim to encourage critical engagement with previously taken-for-granted ideas and assumptions (Moriarty, 2000; Woodrow & Fasoli, 1998)? For Natalie, opportunities to engage in critiquing dominant early childhood discourses and to identify new alternatives for children's services contributed to her sense of agency. In this sense, her emerging "criticality" (Moriarty, 2000, p. 235) seemed instrumental to understanding her resilience. In contrast, others warn that exposure to critical discourses can engender feelings of confusion, disillusionment, demoralisation and

paralysis, inimical to the hope and optimism that Halpin (2001) sees as essential if teachers are to maintain their commitment. To date, there seems little empirical evidence to support either position.

It seems clear, though, that if resilience is an attribute that we seek to foster in early childhood educators, it will need to be accorded as much attention in professional preparation and development programs as that given to qualities such as caring and responsiveness. Yet such a focus could be problematic. As Glantz and Sloboda (1999) write, "An increasingly prevalent belief is that if some members of a group could overcome a given adversity then other members can as well and if they do not, it is because they are unmotivated or put in too little effort" (p. 120). In other words, lack of resilience could be recast as individual inadequacy rather than a reflection of the structural problems endemic in children's services in a social-cultural political context where young children and those who work with them are not highly valued.

We would need to be vigilant, therefore, to avoid conflating resilience with the self-sacrifice so often associated with the profession (Lyons, 1996; Nias, 1999; Petrie & Burton, 2000). Moreover, we would need to ensure that efforts to foster the resilience of early childhood educators are accompanied by determined and strategic campaigns to achieve improved workplace conditions, salaries more commensurate with responsibilities, and higher professional status. Subject to these caveats, the exploration of ways to foster resilience could be a useful focus of future efforts to address the staffing crisis in children's services. The case study of Natalie's resilience presented in this article may help to inform such efforts.

* Pseudonyms are used throughout.

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